

By Your Side by Luddleston

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"One would think something so small would not be so impossible to care for. I'm sorry. That's not a good thing to say about a child, is it?"

"Probably not the most diplomatic, but he is quite limited in how many words he knows. I'd venture to say he can't understand you."

Just a king and his closest companion trying to raise a wild, untamable demigod child together. What could go wrong?

By Your Side

Author's Note:

- For [miraculan](#).
- Inspired by [Patroklos, “glory of the father”](#) by [miraculan](#).

Many thanks to @miraculan for being a wonderful font of inspiration and fantastic person to brainstorm with. This fic literally would not exist without them.

To anyone who is reading this who's here from my Hades nonsense with only minimal idea who these gents are, WELCOME TO TEAM HOT DADS. Join us on this ship, it's a great time here. Not at all tragic. Mostly. Ok, that's a lie.

"One would think something so small would not be so impossible to care for," Peleus said, and then sort of frowned, his lips pressing together in a flat line. "I'm sorry. That's not a good thing to say about a child, is it?"

The tiny terror in question was squalling again, absolutely refusing to fall asleep. Phoenix had heard him from all the way down the hall.

He came closer, settling a hand on Peleus' shoulder. "Probably not the most diplomatic, but he is quite limited in how many words he knows. I'd venture to say he can't understand you."

Words may have been beyond the infant's comprehension, but Achilles did recognize Phoenix's voice, and he paused in his fussing to look at Phoenix, his eyes tired and teary, his hands balled into obstinate fists. As he quieted, Peleus dabbed at the tears on his cheeks with the corner of the blanket he was still mostly wrapped in.

"I've no idea what it is about you that calms him like this," Peleus said, sounding a little frustrated that he wasn't able to quiet his son's cries himself.

"Nor do I," Phoenix admitted—like Peleus, he had limited understanding of how to take care of a child before Achilles. He was fairly certain Achilles was not normal as children came, either, being the son of a goddess. "Is he hungry, do you think?"

"No." Peleus yawned, and let Phoenix take the child from him. "He is, by all accounts other than his own, just fine." He leaned his head against Phoenix's shoulder, giving a lingering sigh.

"Must be growing more teeth," Phoenix suggested, which made Peleus turn his head to hide his face with a groan.

"I hope they're not as sharp as the last ones," he said.

"Don't hold out on that," Phoenix said. Achilles resembled his goddess-mother in a number of ways—his pointed ears, his wild gold curls, his sea-blue eyes—the teeth were just the newest of the list of similarities. "Were you like this, as a child?"

Peleus had nymph heritage, too, although it didn't show on him quite as obviously as on his son. "I don't know. Perhaps all the trouble I caused my mother is being reflected back upon me."

Achilles didn't seem to be too much trouble right now, although he was rubbing at his eyes with a particular sort of irritation that told Phoenix there was a good chance he would start crying again, especially if Phoenix left. Peleus' weight leaned more heavily against Phoenix's side, one of his arms around Phoenix's waist.

"Are you falling asleep standing up?" he asked.

"It's a distinct possibility."

"Get in bed," Phoenix ordered, bossing his king around in the way he only did during these strange nighttime hours, when Peleus felt less like his king and more like his companion, less like the man who rescued him from his father and more like a partner.

"Yes, dear." When he threw out endearments like that, or kissed Phoenix on the head before the two of them finally collapsed into bed together, Phoenix used to swear Peleus was sleep-addled enough to have mistaken Phoenix for his absent wife. He'd come to realize that Peleus' ordinary levels of physical affection were heightened whenever he was tired—he clung and he nuzzled and he was loath to let Phoenix out of his embrace.

It was nothing Phoenix was offended by. They shared Peleus' bed more often than not, with Achilles curled up on Phoenix's chest because he wouldn't fall asleep anywhere else, and Peleus pressed up against his side, an arm over Phoenix's waist, close enough that he could feel it if Achilles started squirming. Phoenix had become accustomed to the way Peleus' hair stuck up in the front when he woke, to the way his hand patted around comfortingly whenever he felt Achilles start to cry, to the way his first words every morning were some kind of mumbled nonsense with Achilles' name thrown in there, left out in a tangle for Phoenix to interpret.

It made Phoenix's heart ache, his longing for this man compounded the closer they became. He frequently imagined putting a voice to those feelings, finally admitting his affection for Peleus ran deeper than their friendship permitted.

Each time, he felt like those words got stuck in his throat, trapped by the fluttering patter of his heartbeat, forced down because what if it caused Peleus discomfort, what if by extension it hurt *Achilles*? Phoenix loved the boy like his own son, and distancing himself from Peleus would mean distancing himself from Achilles too.

It was better this way, he decided every time, swallowing his would-be confession. Let Peleus focus on his kingdom and his family. Let Phoenix be by his side to assist, but not to interfere.

Still, he couldn't help the way he selfishly enjoyed the curl of Peleus' arm around his waist, like a lover might hold him.

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By the second or third year of Achilles' life, all conversations around the palace grounds at Pthia typically began something along the lines of, "hello, good morning, how are you, *where's Achilles?*"

"He's a *toddler*," Peleus said, catching up with Phoenix in yet another room that did not contain Achilles, "he shouldn't be this fast." Peleus was limping already, his old wound from his time aboard the Argos acting up, and he leaned heavily enough on his cane that Phoenix knew catching this preternaturally fast three-year-old was going to be mostly up to him and whoever else he could round up.

"Keep asking around, see if anyone's spotted him," Phoenix said, "I'll start looking outside."

The one fact that saved them on most occasions was that Achilles was fairly easy to spot and all of the residents of the palace were becoming rather used to scooping up the wayward prince wherever they found him and carrying him back to his father and/or Phoenix himself. He was, at the very least, the only blond-haired child running about at speeds too fast for such a small boy.

Swift-footed Achilles, they were calling him. It was sure to be a powerful and heroic epithet someday, but right now it was the most irritating thing about him.

"I'll come with you," Peleus said, because he probably knew as well as Phoenix where Achilles could be reasonably expected to head if he wasn't indoors.

There was not a long stretch between the doorway and the oceanside, and Phoenix ran with Peleus walking behind him, unable to keep pace but he would catch up eventually. *If the gods are going to curse me with a child who can outrun me, at least they have blessed me with you*, Peleus had told him once.

As predicted, Achilles was sitting on the beach, close enough that the water was rushing over him with every inland lap of the waves, up to his

shoulders. He turned his head when Phoenix called his name, bright blue-green eyes happy and curious.

"Achilles, you *can't* just go sitting in the ocean like that," Phoenix chided him, scooping him up and getting the front of his tunic covered in seawater and sand for his troubles.

Achilles was already whining, his hand outstretched toward the ocean. He could speak in full words but he was babbling nonsense, along with little chittering sounds that weren't entirely human of him.

"It's dangerous," he continued, walking Achilles back to his father, "you're going to drown yourself someday." Although, he hadn't yet. This was not the first he'd done this, either. Phoenix was much more comfortable when one of them or a nurse or some kind of adult was able to watch over Achilles while he played in the sea. The waves aside, the ocean was full of creatures that weren't kind to outsiders, and while Achilles normally plucked starfish and sea snails out of the tide pools, there was a chance that someday he'd reach for an urchin or a jellyfish.

As Achilles looked over Phoenix's shoulder at the ocean he was being pried away from, Phoenix could have sworn he said, "*mama*."

Thetis hadn't been seen since she first fled Pthia. There was little chance that Achilles would even recognize her; he had been so young when she left.

Phoenix handed Achilles off to Peleus, then spared a backward glance at the sea, which had already erased the little divot where Achilles had been sitting. If she was watching, he could only hope Achilles' mother was as committed as ever to keeping him safe.

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"Get out of my bed, you little beastie," Phoenix told Achilles, who was trying to worm his way in undetected. It was a rare occasion on which Phoenix was not piled in with Achilles and Peleus, and a rarer occasion in

that Phoenix was sleeping in the middle of the day. "You'll catch whatever I'm afflicted with, shoo."

His voice was a croak, and an exhausted one, not at all convincing.

"Achilles, go," he tried, more firmly, and it only resulted in another coughing fit.

Achilles did go, his too-quick footsteps pattering away, but he only brought Peleus with him. Phoenix tried to burrow deeper into his blankets, but lying in too horizontal a position made his head fill with congestion and it was impossible to breathe.

"No better today, are we?" Peleus asked, sitting on the side of his bed. Excellent. Now he was going to have to shoo away the both of them.

"I simply need to rest," he said, his voice coming out pitiful. It had been a long time since he was this ill. Not since he still lived in his father's house. "Don't stay, you'll catch it."

"Nonsense, I never catch cold." Peleus unwrapped him from the blankets as if he was an unruly child, and elsewhere the cushion of the bed dipped beneath him. Achilles had clambered back in.

Peleus' hands reached for his cheeks, and Phoenix frowned, because he knew how poorly he looked, pale and clammy, his hair lank and dark circles sagging beneath his eyes. "Please, Peleus." There had to be some limit to 'I never catch cold,' and Phoenix feared this would be it. This particular illness had run through half the palace already, with such fierceness that it seemed Apollo himself had a vendetta against them. Phoenix would attribute this less to Apollo and more to the season—in the chill of winter everyone was packed too tightly together to allow room to breathe clean air.

"I have told you, I will not catch it." Peleus said this with the same kind of kingly finality with which he gave royal proclamations, a tone which made Phoenix's protests die on his tongue. "Nor will Achilles. His mother's blood prevents this, as does the blood of my own ancestors."

He stood, and busied himself with a number of items that had been left on the low table in the center of Phoenix's room, food he hadn't the energy to eat, and a pitcher and bowl of water. When Peleus returned, he pressed a cool cloth to Phoenix's temples.

"You don't need to coddle me," Phoenix said. He was reminded of when he first left his father's home, when Peleus had saved his life. After, Phoenix had expected a physician or a palace servant to tend to his wounds, but Peleus himself had cleaned his injuries, put herbal medicines over the damage, and bandaged what he could. Phoenix still bore several of those scars, including the one that crossed through the right side of his lips.

Peleus had treated that particular area with special gentleness, but he had also remarked that, *"at least this one, if it scars, will only serve to make you more handsome."*

"I do indeed, if you won't take care of yourself," Peleus said. "Have you eaten?"

"I'm not hungry." Keeping his eyes open was making his head throb, so he closed them, and allowed Peleus to lay a hand on his forehead to check him for a fever. Given that Peleus' fingers felt cool, he was probably quite feverish indeed.

"I'll get you some broth, then, something you can drink. Keep your strength up."

"You don't need to," Phoenix said, pressing his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose where the pressure had built up in the most painful way. The idea of the king fetching broth for him was ludicrous no matter how close the two of them were, but Peleus didn't send someone for it, he went himself.

Phoenix must have fallen asleep before Peleus returned and he hadn't woken him, because when he finally did stir, it was dark but for candlelight. Peleus was sitting on the bed with him—Phoenix didn't recall his arrival—and Phoenix was lying with his head on Peleus' chest, turned to the side so

that his breathing wasn't quite so hampered. Achilles was cuddled up to Peleus' other side, listening to him talk.

He was telling a story about his days on the Argos, a tale that Phoenix had heard enough times that it became soothing background noise, the words unnecessary to focus on. He had one arm around Phoenix's shoulders, and his hand was petting through Phoenix's hair, gentle over his hairline but with a little extra force over his temples to relieve the pressure built up there.

"Are you up?" Peleus asked him, tipping his head to look at Phoenix's eyes, which were indeed open.

"Yes, I think," he said.

"Good. Achilles, bring us that bowl," Peleus instructed. "You're not getting out of eating this time, even if I have to feed you from my own hand."

"You don't have to do that."

"No, I don't," Peleus replied, "but I will anyway."

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Achilles did *have* a bedroom, but he didn't often use it. He usually slept in Phoenix and Peleus' bed—Peleus' bed, which Phoenix only shared because Achilles would fuss if he was away. Phoenix supposed he also had a bedroom he didn't often use.

Peleus had a habit of taking in strays, and did not like his habit of taking in strays to be called that. "*I'm not really being all that charitable if it works out so well for me in the end,*" he said once, squeezing the back of Phoenix's neck to make his point. "*Wherever would I be without you?*"

His newest not-charity case was a son of one of the men Peleus had been aboard the Argos with. Apparently he owed Menoitius enough to take in his exiled son, and then was a good enough man to make sure said exiled son was safe and cared for even through all Patroclus' nightmares and wordless

terror. He didn't say anything, this new lad, and he was really just a scrap of a thing, even compared to Achilles, who was small for his age.

Achilles took a liking to little Cleo (a nickname Patroclus did not seem to be bothered by even though it was a more effeminate version of the shortening of his name) and clung to him like a child with a new favorite toy or pet. At first, Phoenix worried he would tire of his new friend, especially when Patroclus continued mostly nonverbally (although he could write his letters, maybe they could teach him to communicate that way?) but Achilles did not seem to wish to be separated from him anytime soon.

"It seems he has found a lifelong companion," Peleus said, watching the two boys from the doorway of the bedroom with which they had appointed Patroclus. Achilles was lying with his head on Patroclus' chest, an ear pressed over his heart so that its steady beat could lull him to sleep. "I am glad for him. I've always wanted Achilles to have somebody by his side as you are at mine."

Phoenix often thought he had largely overcome his romantic feelings for Peleus, but when he said things like this, it was impossible not to feel a little twinge of that affection. "I am glad of it for Patroclus' sake as well," he said. "I hope that he can remain alongside Achilles in the same way I will be with you."

"Unless Achilles leaves here and requires your counsel, of course," Peleus said, finally taking his attention from the boys to look at Phoenix. "I could not do such a thing—my old wounds have put me far past my prime for adventuring, and he will need you."

Peleus was talking of a battle. Achilles, according to prophecy, was going to be greater than his father, so why should that not extend to his martial accomplishments? "Of course," he agreed, although he couldn't imagine he'd be as proficient at giving such advice as Peleus would be.

"You know, Phoenix..." He trailed off with one hand rubbing over his beard, a deep reverie.

"Yes?" Phoenix prompted him.

"I couldn't sleep last night, that's all."

With Achilles having fallen asleep just like this in Patroclus' room, Phoenix had slept in his own bedroom, no need to mind the clingy prince who wanted company and would not be content with just his father.

Phoenix hadn't slept last night, either. He was so used to Achilles fast asleep on his chest, to Peleus' arm around his waist. To hearing the breath of two other people over the stillness of the night air. "Neither could I," he admitted.

"I can count the nights we've not shared a bed in the past, oh, five years or so, on this hand," Peleus said, tallying up about three or four.

"We had to know this would happen at some point," Phoenix said, if only because he felt it should be spoken. Achilles was growing up, and he would not be at his father's side forever, even if it did seem he needed a constant companion.

"It's true." At length, Peleus sighed. "Come to bed with me," he said.

Gods above, how many times had Phoenix imagined those words in a slightly more amorous context?

In his imagination, he'd had a much better response than, "I... what?"

"Neither of us can sleep alone," Peleus said in his easy, pragmatic way, the kind of tone that made all arguments dissolve out of one's mind. "Achilles has chosen other accommodations for himself but that doesn't mean we must."

"Well, yes, I suppose." The reasoning was sound, of course. Peleus' reasoning was always sound.

"Come, Phoenix. I didn't bring my cane and I'm beginning to get sore, let me lean on you."

Phoenix had been expecting as much when Peleus started putting so much of his weight against the doorframe. He put an arm around Peleus' waist,

walking him down the hall as he did every so often when Peleus overexerted himself.

Phoenix's chamber was closer, but he walked Peleus to his room, because although Phoenix sharing the king's bed was normal and infrequently-gossiped-about these days, the opposite would arouse much more curiosity.

Usually, when they settled in, the bedding would be disturbed by the bouncing of Achilles clambering in, very often beneath the blankets, burrowing through them like the little beastie he was. Tonight, it was just the two of them, taking their usual preferred sides. Phoenix's chest felt lighter without Achilles curled up on him, but soon enough Peleus laid his arm across Phoenix's waist, as close an amalgamation of their usual sleeping positions as they could muster without Achilles present.

Peleus sighed, and Phoenix couldn't tell whether it was an expression of relief or of frustration.

"Thank you," Peleus said, his hand lifting, his fingers stroking at Phoenix's chest. "I often wonder, you know, whether being with me like this is taking you from another's bed."

"It isn't," Phoenix said truthfully, before realizing exactly how much that may betray.

"Phoenix—" Peleus said, but then didn't continue, propping himself up on his elbow so that he looked down at Phoenix beneath him. Peleus' hair spilled over his shoulders, black as ink except for the small flashes of silver at his temples. It brushed Phoenix's shoulders like this, too, given their proximity.

"Yes?" Phoenix said, prompting him to continue.

"Thank you. I cannot imagine raising my son without you."

"You'll never have to," he said, clasping Peleus' palm over his chest. "I'll be here."

Peleus practically collapsed back into his usual sleeping position with a satisfied hum, perhaps a little closer now that there was no chance of Achilles kicking him in the face accidentally.

"Have I ever told you," Phoenix began, a lazy sort of drowsiness overtaking his voice, his hand still resting atop Peleus', "that I'm cursed?"

"How so?" Peleus asked, lifting his head to look at Phoenix and succeeding in nudging him in the shoulder with his chin, his beard scratching a little.

"I will never have children of my own," Phoenix said. "Or so say the gods. I used to think that was a terrible prospect, but I don't particularly wish to pass on my father's name, obviously." He looked at the ceiling because he wasn't sure what he would see on Peleus' face when he said, "Achilles is as much a son to me as any child born of my blood."

Peleus' arm tightened around his waist, squeezing him in a hug. "And you are as much a father to him as I am." His voice, though low as if he was drifting off, was thick with emotion. "You are family to us, Phoenix. We love you dearly."

"I love you, also," Phoenix said, and if Peleus noticed that his voice came out small and tight with nerves, he didn't say anything about it.

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Pleased though they were that Achilles had found a true friend, Phoenix and Peleus soon realized that together, Achilles and Patroclus were a dangerous combination. They had become adept at sneaking around the palace in the formative years of their friendship and hunting down Achilles had become no easier, plus they were now graced with the endlessly annoying turnabout of Achilles hunting *them*.

Phoenix had to requisition bracelets adorned with bells for them, putting them on their wrists and ankles like they were naughty cats, while the two of them pouted and cried about it. He was at his wit's end with their little game of sneaking up on him at all hours, including, memorably, when he was walking back to his room in the dead of night with a candle in hand.

There was a tapestry that was quite noticeably burned because he had dropped it in his surprise, and wax marks all over the rug.

The bells were the only reason Phoenix knew he was finally catching up to Achilles.

The lad had speed but he didn't have precision, and he often turned corners wide and went tumbling into things or people. Phoenix could catch up to him around these turns, especially when Achilles underestimated the lengths to which his limbs were now growing as he rounded ten years old.

And Phoenix did catch him, indeed.

Just as his arms were full of wiggling prince (who was being apprehended because he needed to take a bath—the ocean did not count), Phoenix noted that he did not see Patroclus, nor had he any idea where Achilles' companion had gone. He realized this too late.

Achilles, for all his rambunctiousness, rarely climbed anything of any height, *not* because he was afraid, as he'd once explained. Patroclus, as it turned out, had no such not-fears.

He came flying down onto Phoenix's head, landing squarely on his back and knocking the wind out of him, shrieking and giggling only after he'd already landed. For as annoying as it was, Phoenix was impressed with his ambush.

"You!" he bellowed, trying to dislodge the boy. "How did you even get up there?!"

Patroclus only laughed, his arms and legs still wrapped around Phoenix like a particularly dextrous barnacle. Achilles was grabbing onto Phoenix's leg, having sat down so that his dead weight was pulling at Phoenix.

Peleus found them in this awful tangle, both of the boys still wild with laughter, Phoenix's face flushed in irritation and exertion as he did his level best to remove them and was largely unsuccessful.

"*Achilles!*" Peleus said, in a ringing admonishment so firm even Phoenix paused, as if he was the one being scolded.

Achilles let go of Phoenix's legs, lifting his hands as if to pretend he had never been grabbing him at all. Patroclus dropped off his back, plopping onto the rug with a soft *oof*.

"Where are you supposed to be right now?" Peleus asked the boys, who remained in a heap on the floor, because they knew what was good for them.

They mumbled something incomprehensible, although from Achilles' end it sounded like, *'I don't know,'* which was a complete falsehood.

"Boys." Peleus folded one hand over the other on his cane, his version of firmly crossed arms.

"The bath," they said dully, Achilles slumping onto the floor with exaggerated sadness.

"Then get going," he ordered, standing and watching as the two of them picked themselves up off the floor. "Straight there. And no more 'death from above'."

"But—we like 'death from above'—!" Patroclus whined.

"Pat's so good at it!" Achilles chorused.

"*No more,*" Peleus said. "Else we will have to separate the two of you."

This was the harshest punishment for the boys, and they clutched one another in fear of Peleus' threats being acted upon.

"Nooo, papa, no!" Achilles whined, his ears pinning back, his arms around Patroclus' shoulders.

"Then be good." Peleus gave them a nod brimming with finality, and they scampered off.

Phoenix sagged back against the wall, running a hand through his mussed hair, which Patroclus' landing had been none too gentle on. "They're going to kill me someday," he said, closing his eyes.

Peleus took a few steps closer, then smoothed Phoenix's shoulders of the wrinkles that came from a small boy grasping at one's clothes. "Poor thing," he said. "I'll have to protect you from the little beasties."

"Please, my king, save me from their torments," he sighed, only half in jest, offering his arm to Peleus out of instinct. Peleus took it, also out of instinct, and they moved together down the hall as one.

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Phoenix was in Peleus' study late at night, not consciously making an attempt to avoid the queen but also not sticking around at the banquet that had been planned to celebrate her return to the palace. Thetis being around would be good for Achilles; he ought to get to know his mother. And Peleus seemed happy to see her, if a bit awkward around her.

They would never be an *ordinary* family, not with a mother who was a goddess, but maybe they could be something more closely resembling one. Phoenix was determined to feel happy for them on that account, despite the gnawing unpleasantness in his chest that had been slowly dropping into his stomach over the course of the night.

He ran his fingers about the rim of the cup of wine he had sat on the desk, half-finished in hopes that it would soothe his irritation. Nerves. Anxiety. Whatever it was that was bubbling in him like... like jealousy, maybe.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He was annoyed that he was jealous. He was an adult, he ought to act like one. Thetis was Peleus' wife. She was Achilles' mother. She had a space in their family that Phoenix never really had, even if he'd played at it.

Someone entered the door to the study, and Phoenix recognized the familiar gait. He lifted his head to find Peleus walking in, looking a little flushed with wine from the banquet. There was a couch in his study where Achilles

used to rest while his father was working, and Peleus took a seat there now, stretching his bad leg out before him and leaning back with a perhaps-exaggerated sigh of relief.

"Phoenix, what are you up to in here?"

Phoenix gestured with the papers he was reviewing. Or, rather, the papers that were sitting before him on his desk while he thought about Peleus and did not actually read them. "Just some work. Didn't want to interrupt you with your family."

"You are my family," Peleus said. "But never mind, the feast is over with. I came to fetch you for bed."

"Is your wife not...?"

"No." Peleus stretched, making a little grunt as some of his joints popped. "My wife has never slept beside me except on the occasions at which she was already in my bed for other purposes and was uninterested in the prospect of leaving in the dead of night."

"Forgive me, I had assumed she might very well be in your bed for 'other purposes' during her time here," Phoenix said, although Thetis had been anything but amorous. He'd presumed it was a goddess thing, that she was above it all, that her divine and mystical nature extended to her affections.

Peleus laughed, a little sadly, hand stroking over his beard. "No. She will not be."

"You wish she were?"

"Gods, no!" This was accompanied with a barking laugh. "Have you ever had sex with a nymph, Phoenix? I could hardly handle it as a younger man, much less at my age now!"

"It's only been a decade," Phoenix noted, although Peleus' laughter was infectious and he could feel the corners of his lips pricking with a grin. "You're still plenty spry."

"Maybe for a mortal man, but not a nymph." Peleus sighed. "I think after all this time it would be extremely uncomfortable at best." He poked at Phoenix's leg with his cane. "So come to bed, all right? You'll not find your half otherwise occupied."

Your half.

Peleus was not entirely drunk, but drunk enough that he laid atop Phoenix rather than beside him, his cheek on Phoenix's chest. At times, they woke like this after falling asleep beside one another, entangled by happenstance in the night.

Peleus made a self-satisfied hum and fumbled around for Phoenix's hand, intertwining their fingers. "You know, lying with my wife was never this comfortable," he said, giving his hand a little squeeze.

"She does have some intimidating claws," Phoenix remarked, squeezing back, his fingers digging in so that Peleus could feel the bluntness of his fingernails which were anything but claws.

"She has intimidating everything."

Phoenix didn't necessarily expect Peleus to admit he was intimidated by his wife, but Thetis was as described. She was taller than Peleus by a head and shoulders, not that Peleus was a tall man to begin with, her teeth were even sharper than Achilles', and her face looked distinctly otherworldly. She was very clearly not human.

"She wants Achilles to leave us," Peleus said. "To train with Chiron."

This had been a part of the plan for Achilles for some time, Phoenix knew. It was initially Peleus' idea, after all. "You don't think he's ready?"

"I do. I... hesitate to send him from my side, and to separate him from Patroclus. They love one another dearly."

"Patroclus would remain here?" Phoenix asked.

"Of course," Peleus said, sounding a bit indignant. "You think I would send him from us?"

"I would never think so." Certainly not with the way Peleus doted on the boy as if he were another son. "I was of the impression he might go along with Achilles, actually." Phoenix often participated in the boys' martial training, and Patroclus outclassed any other youth he had seen. He was as strong as Achilles and nearly as quick, with good aim, and he rarely lost a spar.

Peleus sighed. "I would hope that could be the case, but despite Patroclus' lineage to Zeus, he is not divine enough to be trained by the centaur."

Phoenix could not help his scoff. "Patroclus is a better warrior than half those Chiron has trained, I am sure of it."

"You say that because he's your boy," Peleus said, which was *wrong*, Phoenix said it because it was *true*.

And also because Patroclus was their boy.

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"I'm going after him," Patroclus said, a fierce look of determination on his face. The sun was already dipping below the horizon, Achilles had left with the centaur at dusk. They had forestalled his departure by another few months or so, but the hour had finally arrived.

"So you are," Peleus said, looking somber but immensely proud. "You know the way?"

"Chiron detailed their route before they left. I memorized it." Patroclus was holding himself very still, rigid with nerves, like how he used to look whenever Peleus scolded him before Peleus finally prompted him to admit that he feared he would be sent away again, as his father had exiled him to Pthia.

He was afraid they would try to keep him from going.

Phoenix tried to soothe this worry by packing Patroclus a small bag of supplies to take with him, giving him a traveling cloak that was unseasonably warm but would serve as a blanket if Patroclus had to spend the night in the woods before he reached the mountain.

Peleus, for his part, had given Patroclus a knife, a sharp little blade that would serve him better as a tool than as a weapon of defense. Clearly, he thought Patroclus would catch up with Achilles and Chiron soon enough that he would not need to defend himself, but Phoenix would worry until word came from Mt. Pelion that both boys had arrived.

"Find him, Patroclus," Phoenix told him, before he left. If he had time, he would have thought of something better to say. "Don't ever let him go."

Patroclus gave a firm, final nod that reminded him very much of Peleus, and then he was gone.

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"It's quiet around here without them," Peleus said, giving voice to what Phoenix was often thinking.

"You wouldn't think two boys would cause so much commotion that their absence would be so distinctly felt," Phoenix agreed. His life wasn't entirely absent of pre-teen boys who wanted to learn how to stab things—he'd been training Menesthios, Peleus' grandson by way of his eldest, Polydora, and the river Spercheios. As it turned out, a boy who was half-river was almost as difficult to pin down as a boy who was half-nymph, but Menesthios was much better behaved than Achilles and Patroclus and so Phoenix hadn't had a child jump on his head in several months.

"Considering the general mayhem that follows the two of them around, I am not actually surprised." Peleus was doing that thing where he was talking while also going over the notes for his planned diplomatic trips for the upcoming months, something that would have annoyed Phoenix if he wasn't quite well aware of how Peleus could multitask. "I'm sure they're off terrorizing Chiron now."

"They grow up fast," Phoenix noted with a wistful sigh that was only sort of put on.

"Mm." This was different from Peleus' normal half-attention. He seemed distant, closed off—perhaps missing his boys, too?

Phoenix perched himself on the edge of Peleus' desk, observing him with a little more care. He looked tired, more so than usual. He called himself an old man at every possible turn and he did have the better part of a decade on Phoenix, but he was normally much livelier than he was today.

"Are you alright?"

He patted Phoenix on the knee, still not looking at him. "Fine. I haven't been sleeping well."

"You disappeared in the middle of the night," Phoenix noted. Peleus had gotten up very slowly, as if trying hard not to wake Phoenix. Neither of them were heavy sleepers, so he had not succeeded in this.

Peleus made a face like he hadn't been aware Phoenix had noticed him waking in the late hours. "Just dreams keeping me awake, that's all," he said, purposefully dismissive.

"Nightmares?" Phoenix asked. Peleus didn't often have them, that was more Phoenix's burden to bear. But his worry for his son could easily transmit itself into disturbed sleep.

Peleus shook his head. "Just disconcerting."

"Wake me, if you need to," Phoenix said. He didn't note that Peleus would wake him anyway.

"I'll be fine." Peleus gave another squeeze to his knee. "Aren't you heading off? If I recall, there was a young man mooning after you who came by some time ago."

Phoenix knew who he was referring to, the latest in a long line of distractions. Said distractions usually realized they were distractions, and

that Phoenix was completely gone for his king. They eventually got married to women, or found other companions who weren't in love with the first man who ever made them feel like maybe love and sex was something they wanted.

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright," he said.

"Completely so. Go, have fun."

As far as he knew, Peleus had no such distractions. Phoenix wondered whether he ever wanted one.

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Peleus had long, thick dark hair, so black it was difficult to believe golden-haired Achilles had come from him until you saw how closely they resembled one another in the face. Peleus was very particular about his hair, and would not let anybody touch it except for Phoenix, who usually did so out of necessity because it was impossible to not end up with Peleus' hair draped over his arm while the two of them slept.

Sometimes Phoenix brushed it for him, more as a comfort than a necessity. This was perhaps slightly beyond the bounds of their friendship, but so was sharing a bed nearly every night. Tonight, he was doing this for Peleus while the two of them curled up in bed, Peleus sitting closer to the candles they still had burning so that he could read the letter he'd received not long ago.

"You're going even more gray here," Phoenix said, fingertips running over the spots near Peleus' temple that were starting to turn pale. There were others at the crown of his head now, too, streaks of silver through the black.

"So the best of us do, it seems," Peleus hummed.

"They seem to be doing well, yes?" Phoenix had already read the letter, which was not the first they had received from Achilles and Patroclus, but they arrived infrequently enough that each was a noteworthy occasion. The boys did not have much time for letter-writing, their training taking up the

majority of their hours. Also, at first, they had been too excited about their new life on the mountain to remember the family they'd left at home. After a while, longing for their boyhood home had set in, and they finally thought to write.

There was a village at the foot of the mountain where the boys could deliver their letters to a courier and have them sent back to Pthia. As expected, Patroclus' writing was a bit neater, and he was more eloquent and well-written than Achilles, although Achilles was catching up. Achilles liked to include strange-colored feathers he'd found. This time, he'd delivered one that shone blue and green and purple depending on how the light caught it. Peleus was twisting it between his fingers while he read.

"They do seem to be doing well," he agreed, with a sigh that sounded very much like relief.

Phoenix had given up on brushing Peleus' hair and was simply running his fingers through in long, easy strokes. His hair was straight as a pin, unlike Phoenix's wild curls, which would tangle at the slightest provocation. "Chiron is teaching them much," he said, "although it does seem Patroclus has fallen into his old habits of fearing that he will be suddenly excommunicated without a moment's notice."

"You can't blame the lad," Peleus said, which was true.

Phoenix watched Peleus' hair shift in the light as he stroked it, black turning gold and silver turning white as candlelight hit it. "I've been wondering, is Chiron really your grandfather?"

Peleus shrugged. "Do you think my father would spin such a tale?"

"Yes," Phoenix said, flatly. He had never met Aiakos. "If he's anything like you, absolutely."

"All of my stories about the Argos are entirely true, not a single fabrication," Peleus said, giving a huff of mock offense. "I can't believe you would dare accuse me of such a thing."

"Sure."

Phoenix wondered, if he lifted a lock of Peleus' hair to his lips and kissed the strands of it, would Peleus notice? It was long enough that he didn't feel when Phoenix touched the ends so long as he didn't tug the root.

"If Chiron is your grandfather, then your grandmother is a very brave woman," Phoenix said, distracting himself from his thoughts and making Peleus laugh and slap at his hands in mock offense.

"What are you implying about my grandmother?"

"I'm simply noting that I, for one, would not like to be on the receiving end of a centaur's affections!" Phoenix let Peleus playfully tussle him, butting his forehead against Peleus' shoulder until he backed off.

"That's probably reasonable, actually," Peleus agreed, his laugh breathy and his eyes sparkling. Phoenix loved him with every particle of his being.

"I know," he said, "you keep me around for all my reasonable suggestions."

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There was war brimming on the horizon, and not the usual sort of scuffling between kingdoms that broke out every so often. This was war like none of them had ever seen before, an alliance of Achaean kingdoms coming together to face a foreign power thought to be nigh-impenetrable. They said it was over a woman, but that felt trite. There was something being stirred up here, and it was not of mortal hands.

"I don't like this," Peleus said, when the visiting envoy from Sparta arrived. They were not kings, not well-known men, just soldiers and ambassadors, proof of how thinly the house of Atreus' resources were spread just accruing forces. "I don't know for certain what they're here for, but I can guess."

Phoenix could guess as easily as Peleus, but he didn't say it aloud. Nobody did. They all knew what the envoy was here for—silver-footed Thetis' mortal-born son, foretold to be greater than his father, a warrior who could

have taken on Zeus himself if his mother had not been disallowed a divine lover.

When the envoy came forth to make their case, the hall was nearly empty, just Peleus and Phoenix and a trio of the highest-ranking myrmidons. Phoenix stood all the more rigidly because of what Peisandros had told them earlier. These men were not just here for Achilles.

"My son has been taken from Pthia by his mother," Peleus said. It was neither full truth nor complete falsehood; in actuality, Achilles was in the process of being taken by his mother. When the envoy had arrived, messengers had been sent to the nereids, although Phoenix had no idea whether Thetis had been made aware and was racing for Pelion to meet her son or whether the messenger still waited at the shore to tell her the news. "We know not where." That much was true. They knew Thetis would keep her son safe to the best of her ability, but not what that might entail.

"We are not solely looking for Achilles, my lord," said one of the ambassadors, an older man, a veteran soldier. He was doing most of the talking, likely because they assumed his age and his accomplishment would endear him to Peleus. "We were also told that Patroclus of Opus is here."

"What need have you of Patroclus? He is unlike my son, he does not share divine blood. He is not a warrior of any renown."

The ambassador told him what they already knew by way of the commanders, who had teased the details from them during last night's meal. "Patroclus of Opus is one of the suitors of Helen of Sparta, bound by honor to defend her marriage to the son of Atreus."

When Peisandros first said this, Phoenix had replied with an incredulous laugh. Helen of Sparta had been married to Menelaus long enough that Patroclus would have been no more than a child at the time of the betrothal. They had a daughter who was only a few years younger than Patroclus himself. It was absurd.

Peleus did not remark on the absurdity of the claim, only asked for evidence and then calmly informed them that Patroclus of Opus did not reside at

Pthia, although he had done so for a time after his father had exiled him.

"We inquired at Opus," the ambassador said. "Although the son of Menoeitus has been released from his exile, he did not return to his homeland."

This was a surprise. Phoenix couldn't help eyeing Peleus—had he known Patroclus' exile had been nullified?

Peleus held himself with perfect calm, implacable as always, but from Phoenix's position, to his side and slightly further back, he could see one of Peleus' hand grip his opposite wrist behind his back. He had not known.

"I am afraid I cannot direct you to him," Peleus said, with a sigh of distress that did not feel exaggerated. "Gentleman, to be forthright: if I have no idea where my own son is, how am I to know the location of anybody else's? I feel the loss of Achilles strongly enough. You must understand the position I am in, my only son taken from me by his goddess mother." The slump of his shoulders and the defeat in his posture was genuine. They truly did not know where Achilles was.

The ambassadors looked among themselves, hopefully wondering how they were going to explain this to Menelaus and not plotting any further questions.

"We thank you for your hospitality, my lord." The former, it seemed. "We wish you luck in locating your son. Do notify us if he is to return."

"Of course," Peleus said, with earnestness that definitely *was* put on. "What father would not want to see glory for his son?"

The kind of father who wanted that son to be kept safe, Phoenix presumed. The kind of father the two of them were.

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Thetis came to them in the night, which meant she did not enter the palace by conventional means, which meant she certainly saw the two of them

wrapped up in one another in their usual way, perhaps holding one another a little tighter than usual out of comfort.

Phoenix shot out of bed in a rush, but Peleus merely sat up, shifting his hair out of his face.

"Good evening," he said, as if he was greeting her from behind his desk and not abed with another man.

She inclined her head. She was sitting on the windowsill, which must have been her means of entry, the moonlight silhouetting her, hair still damp from her journey to the shore. In this light, her eyes, which were black except for rings of Achilles' sea-green, glittered with unearthly depth.

Phoenix wanted to light a candle, if only because a bit more light might make her divinity less obvious and strange.

"Have you found him?" Peleus asked immediately. "Is he safe?"

"He is as safe as I can make him," she said, hands folded primly in her lap. She saw no need to come closer, despite the fact that she met with her husband. Phoenix would have gotten out of bed completely, had Peleus not settled a hand on his knee, arresting him where he was at. "He is among the court at Scyros."

It was not distant enough, not by half. "Even if Achilles has never been there, someone is bound to recognize him," Phoenix said. Reputation alone would make him stand out. Half-nymph, bright-haired, a demigod and a prince.

A sly smile crept onto Thetis' lips, so reminiscent of Peleus that Phoenix understood why the gods had deemed them a good match. "Not in a veil and a gown, they won't."

"He's disguised as a woman?" Peleus said, following her insinuation quicker than Phoenix did.

She nodded. "I know you may take offense to my hiding your son in this way, but this is how he is safest," she said. "No one will look for a warrior among maidens."

It would not be difficult to disguise Achilles in such a way. Even knowing that he must have grown in the years since they had last seen him, he had always had a feminine grace and beauty that they assumed came from his mother's heritage. "*He certainly did not get that from me,*" Peleus had said once, scuffing his beard against Phoenix's shoulder in demonstration.

"Are we the only souls who know?" Peleus asked.

"The princess of Scyros, Deidamia, is aware," Thetis said. "She has a quick mind and is witty and charming enough to cover for his secrets." She spoke not only with certainty but with admiration. It was clear she trusted and liked this girl. Of course she did, that was what it would take for Thetis to leave Achilles in her care.

"Right, good," Peleus said, trying to hide a yawn. "Thank you for telling us straight away, as I asked."

"Of course. He is your son." Ostensibly she addressed Peleus, but she looked between him and Phoenix both.

"Have you any idea where Patroclus has gone?" Peleus asked.

She shook her head. "He was with Chiron when I collected Achilles." There was a little look of distaste on her face. "I was not aware he was being allowed to train with Achilles. Chiron assures me he did not slow down progress." It was quite clear she did not believe this entirely. "Chiron also assures me he will keep the boy safe, although I presume that news was for your benefit."

"It was, indeed," Peleus said. "He is a second son to us." In this, he was clearly referring to himself and Phoenix, implying that Achilles, too, was Phoenix's son. What a strange family they shared with this goddess.

"I will visit him from time to time, when the currents allow an excuse for it," Thetis said. "But too often would be suspect."

"I understand. Send word when you do, if you can. Only if it is safe."

"I will," she said, and then, paying them no benediction, she slipped back out the window.

In her wake, Phoenix's heart finally slowed to its regular pace.

Peleus let out a laugh so loud it startled Phoenix, and then drew him into an embrace, overjoyed, nearly slipping into his lap with it. His face pressed against Phoenix's neck, arms winding tight around his shoulders, and Phoenix returned the affection in kind, his palms flat to Peleus' back.

"He's alright," Peleus whispered with a shocked sort of awe. "They both are."

Phoenix had to admit he still had some anxiety lingering, but his worries were soothed enough that he could relax into Peleus' touch, participating in the simple joy of knowing their boys were alive and ostensibly well.

They settled back into bed with lightness in their hearts, pressed together face-to-face, still holding one another.

"You didn't tell me we were awaiting a visit from Thetis tonight," Phoenix said, more of a tease than anything.

"She didn't send word ahead. Even so, I would have done no different." Peleus gave as much a shrug as he could, given their positioning.

"It is always strange to see you with your wife," Phoenix admitted. "At times, your relationship with her seems almost transactional."

"I think that's accurate wording." Peleus' hand cupped the back of Phoenix's neck, his thumb rubbing over his nape. "What is more transactional than an arranged marriage in which one is required to bear a son for the sake of prophecy?"

"When you put it that way..." Phoenix found himself stroking Peleus' hair again, Peleus' laugh tickling his neck.

"I hold true affection for her," he said. "But had I my choice..."

"Oh? Was there another lady you had your eye on before Zeus arranged your marriage?"

"No, there wasn't." Peleus pulled back so that he could look at Phoenix, and spoke as if he was placing his words very carefully. "Phoenix, there is no other. I do not share my bed with anybody but you."

"Oh, I..." He found himself succumbing to the usual rush of emotion, all the more potent with Peleus speaking frankly.

"I do not share my heart with anybody but you, either."

"Gods. Yes. I... nor do I."

There was a little quirk of a smile to Peleus' lip. "Are you quite certain? My recollection is that you were sleeping your way through half my myrmidons over the past decade or so."

"You make me sound like a lush," Phoenix groused, although his distractions had been numerous. Just last week, with that charioteer... "While I may share my bed with others at times—" whenever Peleus was away, really, "—my heart belongs to nobody but you."

They were so close that Peleus barely had to shift to kiss him. Just a tip of his head, a jut of his chin, his fingers still smoothing over Phoenix's nape.

It was as if there was a coil of longing with him, like a serpent, which lay dormant whenever it could, but lifted its head on rare occasions on which his heart could not deny his feelings for Peleus. And Peleus had taken that tiny creature to his chest and awakened it, treating it with gentle hands, and telling Phoenix it was allowed to run wild if someday it wished.

He tilted his head to give Peleus a fuller kiss, his hand around Peleus' shoulder slipping to his waist instead, that longing coiling around both of

them, desire that crept over every part of their being. Where Phoenix would normally have pushed it down, Peleus stoked it further, clutching at him, moving against him, pulling him so close they made one shape in the dark.

He had tied his heart to Peleus' long ago, and Peleus was tightening the knot. He never wanted to be parted from this man.

"I love you," Phoenix said, and Peleus shivered. The night air was not cooling him, not with the heat building between them.

"I have always loved you," Phoenix said, and Peleus cried out. They moved in a rhythm steady as the waves they could hear rolling against the nearby shoreline.

"I want nothing more than to continue loving you, forever," Phoenix said, and Peleus came. Dawn's wings spread across the sky and Peleus was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. The morning light was second to kiss his cheeks, it followed Phoenix's lead.

They lay together while the sun rose, the heat of their passion cooling to that of a banked hearth. Peleus told him endless sweet things, half of which Phoenix didn't completely hear, mumbled against his skin as they were, but he felt them, and that was what truly mattered.

"How I wish we would have worked this out sooner," Peleus sighed, finally leaning back just to look at him. He had never looked at Phoenix this way, as if awestruck.

Phoenix shook his head. "I may wish I had put words to it sooner, but I have loved you in all the ways I have wanted to, spent countless nights by your side, raised a family together."

"I could have done with a lot more kisses, in retrospect," Peleus remarked.

Phoenix quickly set about giving him another.

"That, I can work to amend straight away."

Author's Note:

Find me on twitter [@luddlestons](#) for more gay iliad nonsense!